

Sharp-tailed Grouse Advisory Committee Meeting 6/7/17

Attendance

Nancy Christel – DNR

Gary Dieck – WWF

Dan Eklund – USDA - CNMF

Dave Evenson – WSGS

Peter David – GLIFWC

Mark Schmidt – DNR

Kris Johansen – DNR

Chris Pollentier – DNR

Mark Witecha – DNR

Jaqi Christopher – DNR

Agenda Repair

Move to discuss alternative permit setting methods after 2017 permit discussion. Approved

Translocation Update – Dan

The second year of translocating sharp-tailed grouse from Minnesota to the Moquah Barrens is complete. The permit allows us to take up to 200 birds, 100 of which can be males. This year, Lake of the Woods was trapped for the first time. There was no problem finding birds, it was just a matter of how many were found on each lek. Of the leks found, only 2 were on DNR property, the rest were on private land, mainly CRP land. In 2016, 29 birds (13 male, 16 female) were translocated and in 2017, 67 birds were translocated (45 males, 22 females). There are 97 birds total that were released. Close to 300 birds were captured. Hopefully the permit can be amended to allow more males to be taken, since more males are being captured. Weather was an issue for catching birds this year. 10 birds were GPS collared this year and are tracked 4 times a day. While tracking this year's birds, a male that disappeared last year was found dancing on the lek. There were no trap or transfer mortalities this year.

Mike Hardy's Research Update

All the field work is done. Mike is busy with prairie chicken work and will not be able to focus on STG until September. He thought his field work may have been too early because 4 new leks have been found on the Germann Road Fire area this year. There seems to be a 2-3 year lag time between when an opening is created to when STG start moving in. This could be due to the amount of time it takes for the coarse woody debris to break down.

Hunter and Harvest Surveys for 2016 Season

148 hunters applied for 25 tags. Seven birds were harvested, all from the Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area (NBWA). Everyone who was issued a tag had at least 1 preference point. All but 1 hunter returned the survey. Successful hunters were asked to turn in a wing and feathers to identify sex and age of birds harvested. Those have not been analyzed yet, but at least 2 females were harvested. Most hunters reported having an enjoyable experience. At least 2 hunters complained about other people without STG tags running dogs on the property and flushing grouse.

2017 Permit Level Discussion

The committee unanimously voted to suggest zero permits for all units this year.

2017 spring surveys showed 138 males on managed properties, which is down 18% from 2016. No birds were found on Kimberly Clark Wildlife Area in Price County. The Moquah Barrens had 5 males on leks before more birds arrived from MN. After the release, 10 males were observed dancing on the leks. Game unit 8 is the only unit eligible for a season since it is the only unit with over 25 birds. The 25 bird threshold has no biological background; it is remnant from a past management decision. Both huntable properties in Unit 8 (NBWA and Douglas County Wildlife Area) had a decrease number of birds observed compared to last year. Rusk County had 22 leks 20 years ago and now they are down to 1 lek. Price County has seen the same trend.

Surveys show ruffed grouse numbers are up 17% indicating they are in the upward swing of their population cycle. Typically STG follow the same cycle as ruffed grouse, but we are seeing a decrease. All upland birds took a hit in production last year due to high level of summer rains. It is not believed that harvest is the only factor of decreased birds in Unit 8. All upland bird production was down last year due to frequent and severe summer rains.

Calculation Results:

The quota and max number of permits is calculated using a variety of metrics. The committee uses the calculated numbers as an absolute maximum. The formula suggest for Unit 8: Quota= 45 birds; Max number of Permits = 163.

Committee Member Comments

- The last two years, only unit 8 has been open
- Unit 8 is not a game management “unit” since there are only 2 huntable locations. Really we need to start thinking about it as open properties, not as a unit.
- In the past there has been much more huntable land and a lower success rate. As the amount of land shrinks, the success rates go up.
- The Sharp Tailed Grouse Society would always like to see a hunt, but also agree the numbers are too low this year to justify a hunt
- The population is so small that mortality events could have an effect (weather, harvest, incidental take)
- Incidental take is happening, whether it is reported or not. Some hunters cannot tell the difference between sharp-tailed, spruce and ruffed grouse.
- Some birds are high contributors to the population and some are not, but we, nor hunters, can tell which birds are expendable.

Permit Setting Method

The committee uses a series of metrics to calculate quota and permit levels, but many times the committee thinks the numbers from the formula are too high to hold a sustainable hunt. This has led to concerns that the method, while grounded in science and best available information, could be seen as subjective. What are the other options for calculating quota and permit levels?

What other states do:

Utah – Extremely liberal system

Adaptive Harvest Management Models – Uses Bayesian statistics, uncertain if it would work on a small population and it has not been used for upland game.

Other systems don't seem to fit. Can we formalize our current system? Habitat completely coincides with bird numbers, if the habitat is not there, the birds are not there. Is there a way to incorporate habitat into the metrics? How do you track habitat? There is a realignment initiative to inventory non-forest cover types with a better classification system.

Should we focus our efforts in specific locations such as Crex, Douglas County, Namekagon, and Moquah. They have a chance of population increase, so the focus should be on them.

The advisory committees are made up of species experts from several different agencies and all species committees make permit levels based on more than just formula (some level of subjectivity). But, no other game species has the low numbers seen in sharp-tailed grouse.

Partner Updates:

Nancy – STG viewing blinds – is it better to have observers go out well before dusk? It seems like more females are out mating at the time that people are walking in and flushing birds off the lek. By being out there earlier, you can see what direction the birds are coming from.

Overall consensus: even if the birds are flushed, they come back and finish mating. There is a matriarchy, where older females will breed first and then their daughters and then their granddaughters.

Dave – Applied for and received a citizen monitoring grant for Moquah.

DNR Prescribed burning update: Even though forestry is taking over prescribe burn management, wildlife will still be involved. Forestry will have specific people hired for RX fire and there will be more resources to conduct fall burns, when forestry usually has time and wildlife is busy. One concern is foresters might have a different idea as to what the goal of the burn is. Also, square firebreaks are easy and convenient from a logistical standpoint, but not necessarily the best from a habitat management view.

Dan: Good Neighbor Authority can be used to hire DNR employees to conduct prescribed burns. The money needs to be used on a list of pre-approved activities and has to be used on federal land. How do we start a conversation with FWP to get some of these activities done?